REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Designing visual language: Strategies for professional communicators

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> Designing visual language: Strategies for Professional Communi-
> cators, *Kostelnick, Charles, and David D. Roberts, Allyn & Ba-*
> *con, Toronto, 1997.*

This review was all but written. I had read the book, read it again, planned a document-design-in-technical-communication course around it and successfully taught that course. My opinions were largely settled: I had found the book thorough and clear in its treatment of all the issues relevant to the course; I had found its anchoring taxonomy fruitful for my own lectures, for the presentations my students gave, for their journals and for class discussions; I had found that taxonomy useful both in the analysis of technical documents and in the practical work of designing such documents; I had encountered some annoyances and weaknesses, of course, but in balance they seemed pretty minor. I liked the book and was all set to tell you so. My fingers were hovering over the keyboard.

Then the student evaluations came in. Not one student had a good thing to say about the book. It was simplistic, they complained, and pedantic in the bargain, over-explaining thin, patent concepts in thick, murky terminology. It was laborious, condescending and shallowly chipper: "Who cares if Cathy had a cup of coffee before she redesigned the newsletter?!" one student wailed.

Well, now. These reactions sparked a good deal of deliberation on my part — not to say discomfort over how deeply out of touch I must be with my students — but the customers have spoken, and, while I continue to see many merits in the book, I may not use it when I teach this course next.

The students' comments cannot be taken on face value. For one thing, there are no questions on the evaluation which specifically ask about the text book, which means that those motivated to comment must have been truly aggravated by the

book, but also that there was no invitation for positive remarks. We can perhaps safely say that no one loved it as much as the vocal minority (5 out of 24) hated it, but not much more. Also, these students are a tough crowd. In the five years I've been teaching this course, no class has ever liked the text I've used. More than tough, they're sophisticated — upper-year Rhetoric and Professional Writing students, almost all of whom have had several terms of practical co-op experience in technical communication to augment their previous coursework. Still, whatever relevance my opinions may have, you need to read them knowing that all of the (self-selected) students who had anything to say about Kostelnick and Roberts's *Designing Visual Language* did not like it in the least.

The book is a detailed explication and exemplification of the twelve-celled matrix, Table 1. If you know Kostelnick's earlier work (in particular, his 1988 and 1989 papers), this matrix will look familiar; if you don't, it will look alien.

		Coding Modes		
		Textual	Spatial	Graphic
Levels	Intra-	typeface, size, case	letter and word spacing	punctuation, symbols
of	Inter-	headings	indents, justification	bullets, table rules
Design	Extra-	captions, call-outs	size, perspective	line-weight, ink colours
	Supra-	headers, footers, tabs	placement, orientation	paper colour, icons

Table 1: Kostelnick and Robert's Visual Language Matrix (adapted from their Table 3.1, p.86). The cells here are populated with only a few representative attributes; the table is far from exhaustive.

In either case, its jargon will probably look somewhat heavy. For my money, not all the labels are equally compelling, and some often feel a bit stale coming out of my mouth, especially in clumps like Intra-Graphic and Supra-Spatial. But I haven't been able to come up with replacements that are anywhere near as systematic or, in concert, as revealing. And the very great virtue of this system, for analysis and for design, is the way that it obliges you to consider all the elements of a document. Take the most fundamental building block of a document, type. If you examine or plan a document with this chart as a heuristic, you can't escape considering:

• The (intra-textual variables of) typeface traits, like x-height-to-point-size ratio and counter openness; use of size, case, italics, bolding, shadowing and so on.

• How (the inter-textual variables of) all those traits from a number of typefaces signal the reader (or not) about the document's hierarchical organization.

• How (the extra-textual variables of) all those traits from a number of typefaces work within graphics, tables, charts and figures — as well as between those displays and the rest of the text — to guide the eye and inform the reader (or not).

• How (the supra-textual variables of) all those traits help (or hinder) the reader's navigation though a document and orientation within a document.

• How (the intra-spatial variables of) all those traits interact with various character and word spacings to support (or undermine) legibility.

• How (the inter-spatial variables of) all those traits interact with various vertical and horizontal spacings, in various justifications, at various measures — in body text, in headings, in tables and charts, between modules — to support (or undermine) readability, navigation and orientation.

• How (the intra-graphic variables of) all those traits succeed (or fail) over entire character sets, including punctuation and any necessary symbols.

• How (the inter-graphic variables of) all those traits interact with bullets, tick marks, boxes, rules, against greyscale fills and so on.

• How (the extra-graphic variables of) all those traits work (or not) in various colours.

• How (the supra-graphic variables of) all those traits work (or not) against certain page or screen colours, against varous paper textures and so on.

And so on. Having weathered (or perhaps scanned) this list, I'm sure you're in some sympathy with those students in a lather about the book's labouriousness. And you may be saying, "I would have checked all the relevant characteristics and interactions from this list anyway, without all that terminology". And you might have. My students might have. Experience, and almost any decent typography book, will alert you to these characteristics and interactions. But the important point is that Kostelnick and Roberts don't give you any choice. If you use their grid, and

use it seriously, it's much harder for awkward design decisions to slip by, and much easier to ensure all the components of a document work in harmony.

Thankfully, Kostelnick and Roberts don't refer to their machinery as a "theory". The book is not a semiotic of design. They call their matrix a "taxonomy", and, even better, a "vocabulary". It's a way of talking about the relations of the features of document design.

This way of talking does have a tendency toward the mechanical, granted. But Kostelnick and Roberts control that tendency quite effectively, in a number of ways, all of them (and this is another commanding virtue of the text) fundamentally rhetorical. In particular, they frame every discussion with three overarching terms — audience, purpose and context. Who is this document for? What will they use it for? How will they use it? And Kostelnick and Roberts return constantly, in extended examples, to the counterbalances among several crucial design strategies implicated by audience, purpose and context: arrangement, emphasis, clarity, concision, tone and ethos.

The book's examples are highly redundant, some going on for almost entire chapters with dozens of minor alterations; this appears to have been a source of irritation to my students, but I still regard it as a strength. It drives home the inexorable point, inexorably, that professional design work is a process, that one doesn't just blorp a document photo-ready from one's forehead, not a good document anyway. There are false starts, blind alleys and near misses galore. Kostelnick and Roberts show these essential but non-final stages in almost all of their examples, holding some variables stable (text and typeface, for instance) while shifting others around (weight, location, figure/ground contrast) to illustrate rhetorical effects. Students have the opportunity to see the "same" information in a range of configurations — not just the usual better-and-worse or before-and-after configurations, but the trade-offs among arrangement and emphasis, clarity and concision, tone and ethos, with running commentary on the exigencies of the situation. Moreover, these examples are all very heavily contextualized, woven into narratives with little mimetic details. There is, gauging from my students' reactions, a Fun-with-Dick-and-Jane flavour to some of these treatments, but the advantages in terms of particularization and process-reinforcement are greater to my mind than the disadvantages of the storytime sensibilities.

Variety, too, helps to minimize the cookie-stamping feel of the vocabulary. The examples — along with the (analytic) exercises and (productive) assignments — are all well chosen for their range of scenarios, genres and professions.

Another attractive feature of the book which serves to particularize and humanize the application of the matrix is Kostelnick and Roberts's splicing of ethical

considerations into many of the discussions. Ethics aren't as fully integrated as they might be, and sometimes the word "ethics" is thrown in rather meaninglessly, but the social and personal implications of specific design decisions do come up on a very regular basis in the examples, most notably (and apppropriately) in the data-display chapter. Most current technical communication texts have some sort of "unit" on ethics; this one doesn't, taking the much preferred option of distributing these concerns more widely.

Designing Visual Language is also, surprisingly, quite well designed. Most document design books feel the burden of exemplifying design principles so heavily that they are desperately over-crafted — with crammed margins, graphics for the sake of graphics, navigational cues so thick that they begin to interfere with each other and the text — but not Kostelnick and Roberts. This is a solidly, simply, usably designed text. For instance, it is fashionable to have relatively wide outside margins these days. Previously, the fashion was for wide gutter margins. This book follows neither pattern: the left margins are wide, the right narrow; distinctly non-courant and not even a throwback. But that happens to be best arrangement for right-handed note taking.

While I like the book, it does have limitations. Most notably, despite the wealth of typography, document-design and visual rhetoric material published daily, there is no bibliography in the book and references are minimal. Indeed, while Kostelnick and Roberts pledge allegiance to "empirical research", the actual research they depend on is frequently laughable. Tinker's Legibility of print, for instance, is a prime resource for typographical information (it's a fine tome, dependable for the book-based, pre-computer-revolution text it is, but hardly recent). This lack of a contemporary research base is not particularly worrisome for a how-to book, since most of the guidelines are sensible and well-founded, but it may have contributed to some of the disdain my research-minded students felt for the book, especially in contrast to the books I had on reserve for the course (Horton's *Illustrating computer documentation* and Schriver's *Dynamics in document design*), and in contrast to the superbly theoretical book most of them know from a parallel course in their programme (Kress and van Leeuwen).

Indeed, up-to-dateness is far from the book's strongest suit. Colour printers and monitors are becoming cheap and plentiful, and colour is certainly a prime ingredient in visual language, but colour is effectively ignored in *Designing visual language* — a few lame rules of thumb given without illustration. Similarly, the web is a second-home for many of our students, and an extremely good place to tinker around with design issues; the book makes overtures in these directions, but the authors' comfort with online materials does not appear high.

The typeface discussion is a bit sleight, and a bit too shy technically, but this is not an area where technical communication books are known to shine, and Kostelnick and Roberts cover all the basics. The extended example of designing a logo is terrible. Not only is almost no one who would use this book ever going to be called upon to design a logo, if they used this book to do it, they would assuredly never be asked to do so again. There are also some glaring omissions of topic for a document design text: there is nothing on indexes, nothing on tables of contents, nothing on glossaries. Usability issues, generally, and testing, specifically, are mentioned periodically in the book, but they really should be far more prominent, especially given the book's emphasis on process.

And, speaking of usability testing: *Designing visual language* has the empirically discovered liability of aggravating at least some sophisticated students. My guess is that those students benefited a good deal more than they realized (the class projects were excellent); we all know that students can benefit even while they're pinching their noses. But the book is apparently not going to win many popularity contests.

In balance, *Designing visual language* is a good, practical book for designing documents, on the level of a very thorough primer, which also works as an analytical tool for critically examining (or diagnosing and improving) existing documents. The book's informing matrix is relentless in the attention it draws to the vastly ramified design elements professional communicators need to know about. The authors give their discussions an insistent rhetorical focus. And they treat design work neither as romantic inspiration nor simple product-generation, but as the explorative, audience-centred, contextually sensitive process that it must be, if the documents are to work.

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